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ABSTRACT

This report describes the Prescriptions for Better Writing Program, a 9-week writing skills curriculum, suitable for seventh to ninth grade levels, developed by teachers in New Jersey's Lower Camden County's Regional High School District No. 1. The program was designed for two purposes: to remediate to ninth grade levels and designed for two purposes: to remediate students identified as having problems in composition; and to assist those youngsters identified as potentially having problems in the writing phase of the High School Proficiency Test. The report stresses that the curriculum provides detailed, step-by-step, sequenced instruction for specific writing skills and concentrates on descriptive, narrative, expository, and persuasive writing. The report includes instructional objectives, history of the project, supporting research, description of the practice, evaluation, and sample activities. Four tables of data are included. (MS)

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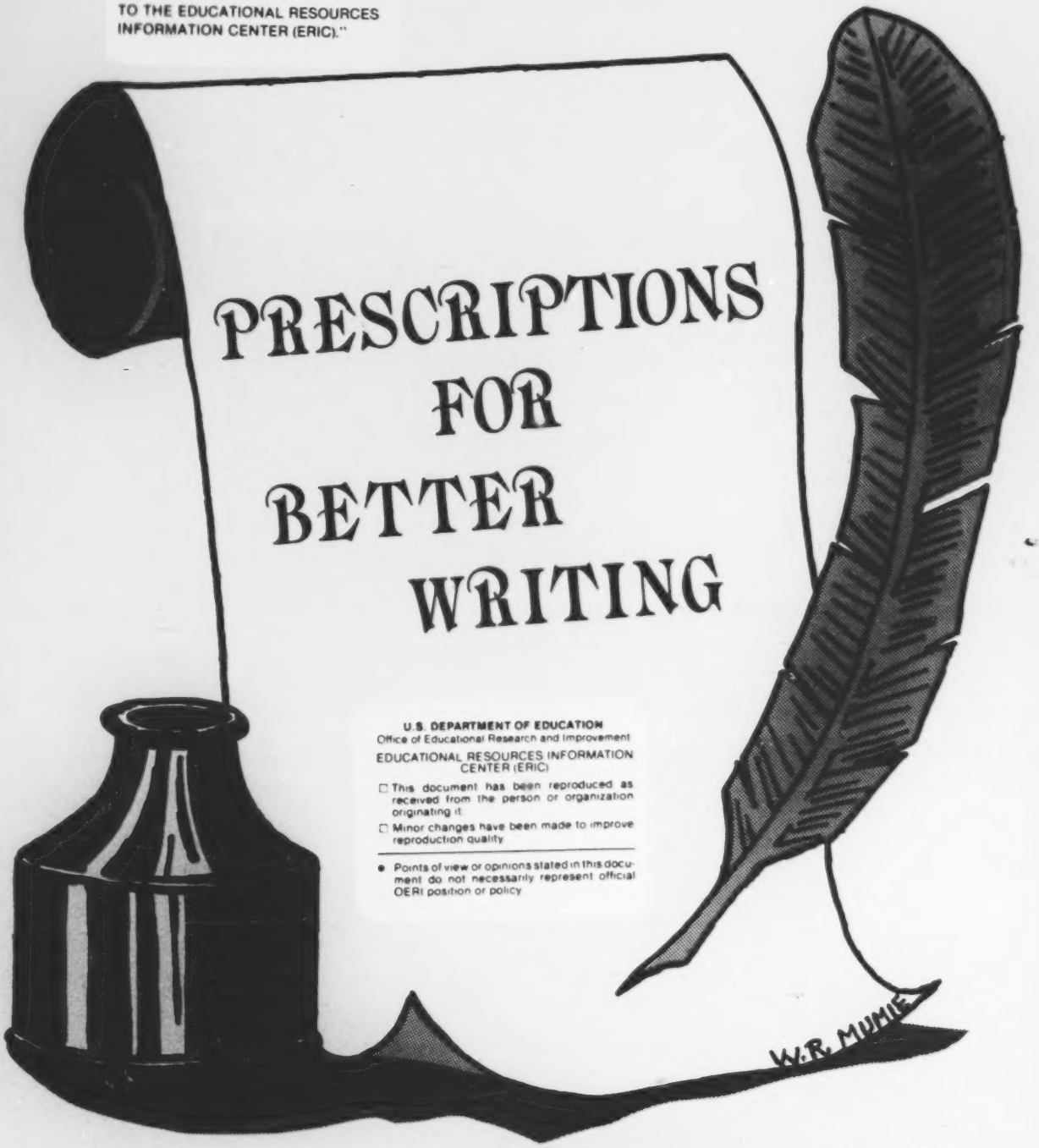

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New Jersey Governor's Teacher Grant Program - 1986
New Jersey State Department of Education

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STATE OF NEW JERSEY
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Commissioner's Statement

Colleagues are frequently cited by teachers as a rich source of new ideas and effective methods that become incorporated into their own instructional practices. Recognizing the potential benefits of such sharing, Governor Thomas H. Kean established the Governor's Teacher Grant Program in 1985. Governor's Teacher Grants provide selected teachers with funds to prepare materials that will enable their instructional practices to be shared with others.

Now, with the conclusion of the first group of grants which were awarded in 1986, these teacher developed materials have been completed. In making these programs available to educators throughout the state, we give recognition to the important contribution that teachers make to school improvement. We are indeed grateful to those dedicated teachers selected as 1986 Governor's Teacher Grant recipients.

Saul Cooperman
Commissioner

SC/JB/RS/dm:2/3211G

Student and Teacher materials for

PRESCRIPTIONS FOR BETTER WRITING PROGRAM

are available from

Lower Camden County Regional School District #1

200 Cooper Folly Road
Atco, NJ 08004

For more information or to acquire materials, contact:

Ms. Judith Reeves
Director of Curriculum

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PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

PRESCRIPTIONS FOR BETTER WRITING

LOWER CAMDEN COUNTY REGIONAL HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT #1

1. Abstract

The program is a nine-week Writing Skills curriculum, suitable for seventh to ninth grade levels, designed for two purposes:

1. To remediate students identified as having problems in composition.
2. To assist those youngsters identified as potentially having problems in the writing phase of the High School Proficiency Test.

The curriculum concentrates on four major areas of writing:

Descriptive
Narrative
Expository
Persuasive Writing

The specific skills of sentence structure, grouping and classifying, sequencing, emphasis of main ideas, and writing conclusions are taught within this structure. Skills such as punctuation, homonym spellings, proofreading, and revision are emphasized throughout the course.

Detailed, step-by-step, sequenced instruction is provided in all of these skills. A structured approach is followed, based on the writing process, with ample time and instruction devoted to error correction. Students should develop during the course an ability to:

1. Express themselves on a chosen topic.
2. Write an extended response rather than a brief reaction.
3. Use a clear beginning, relevant detail for support, and a clear conclusion.
4. Focus on one topic.
5. Use acceptable spelling, usage, and punctuation to the extent that errors do not distract the reader from the paper's purpose.
6. Demonstrate some variety in sentence styles.

Our goals are to ensure that students will be able to write a brief essay in a variety of forms after completing the course, will improve their communication skills as evidenced in their classroom work, and improve their scores on the HSPT.

STUDENT POPULATION/GRADE LEVEL

We are a regional high school district with a total population of over 5,000 students and a minority population of 35%. Our students come from seven sending districts having a variety of educational emphases. Though cooperation exists between the elementary and secondary levels, articulation is difficult; therefore, students have reached us with a wide range of achievement levels and have experienced a range of instructional strategies in writing.

The course has been taught successfully to seventh, eighth, and ninth grade students.

INSTRUCTIONAL OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to:

1. demonstrate an overall sense of organization.
2. develop a central idea on a given or self-chosen topic.
3. use details which support generalizations.
4. write correct sentence structures within their compositions.
5. write a variety of sentence types within their compositions.
6. use vocabulary suitable for their audience within their compositions.
7. edit for grammar and punctuation errors.
8. use transitional words to demonstrate organization within their compositions.
9. write in narrative form.
10. write in expository form.

OUTLINE

I. Introduction: History of the Course Development

II. Support for the Process

A. Student Needs

B. Analyzing of scores
Low levels of mechanical skills
Brief essays
Past methods

C. Research supports process areas as 50% more effective than traditional

III. Support for the Sequence

A. Choice of materials

B. Sequence

IV. Support for Error Correction

A. Objective HSPT

B. Low-level mechanical skills

C. Analysis of type of skill error

V. Support for Modeling Techniques

VI. Lesson Plan Structure

VII. Product Support

VIII. Processor Support

IX. Summary

INTRODUCTION - HISTORY

This project began as a nine-week pull-out course for a number of reasons. The classroom course in language arts in seventh grade has a reading comprehension emphasis, though a move over to a writing emphasis may be a coming trend. The nine-week length provides sequential lessons beginning with simple extension of student ideas and progressing to more difficult application lessons as well as reinforcement.

A number of student problems were found to be common and needed to be addressed by a curriculum. First, many students in low-level achievement groups were sufficiently unfamiliar and uncomfortable with the written medium to prevent their developing even a full one-page effort on any given topic. Secondly, observation of classroom procedure indicated that approaches to writing are limited to presenting a topic and seldom include the support of intensive instruction or follow-up. Grading of student papers tended to be punitive, creating a negative mind-set toward composition, among the students.

Therefore, in an effort to extend student writing and to increase student comfort with composition, the course was based on process-oriented models, such as the Weehawken Project and the New Jersey Project W.R.I.T.& E. In addition, since student error was also a concern, error correction was built into the course.

A structured, sequential approach to instruction was needed. Each of the areas by which the program is defined as a "combined process/structural analysis approach" will be supported by the available research which demonstrates these methods to be successful. We will also support our choice of program development by an extensive survey which shows combined approaches to be considerably more successful than other methods of writing.

To extend student writing and to increase student comfort with the process of writing, lessons were designed in the cyclical format recommended by process-oriented writing proponents. Janet Emig in Web of Meaning judges that in the average classroom the process of writing is "truncated. There are no sponsored pre-writing activities, revision is lost, and no time is provided for any major reformulation or reconceptualization." (Emig, 94).

This led us to anticipate a need for sufficient time in each lesson for the completion of a given assignment to follow the process of: 1. brain-storming, 2. organizing, 3. composing, 4. exchanging and revising (including peer feedback), 5. editing, and 6. re-composing. This variety of writing activities is needed in order to encourage the inexperienced writer to complete what Mimi Schwartz calls the "writing journey." (Schwartz, 6).

The efficiency of this extended time-line is supported by George Hillocks research, "What Works in Teaching composition". Hillocks concluded that the natural process mode proved "about 50% more effective than the presentational mode" (Hillocks, 12).

Moreover, Emig also warns that the presentational mode* is "probably too abstract for the average and below-average student", our original target group. For instance, Emig points out that the typical instruction to "be concise" is an abstract directive which the student will undoubtedly have trouble translating into a set of behaviors. (Emig, 94). Erika Lindemann in A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers finds each writing assignment must "incorporate pre-writing, writing, and re-writing activities in order to be successful". In a classroom where students are told to 'find a topic', but not how to go about doing so, substantial changes in writing ability do not take place. (Lindemann, 25).

Since at the ages of 11 or 12, students are just beginning to generalize, to develop prepositional thought, and to deal with hypothetical or formal operations, the focus of the project is limited to description, simple stories, and concrete subject matter. (Lindemann, 70). This is in line, as Lindemann points out, with Piaget's theories of child development in learning.

*N.B.: "Presentational" is Hillocks term for placing the assignment on the board.

SEQUENCE OF INSTRUCTION

Beyond the use of the process model, a careful sequence of skills needed to be built into the course. Lindemann suggests the sequence should move from "creating single sentences, through building paragraphs, to rewriting." Further, coordinate relationships built to subordinate relationships, and these relationships are then applied to "progressively larger amounts of material." (Lindemann, 159).

ERROR CORRECTION

No piece of writing, no matter how descriptive, nicely worded, or well organized, will meet approval with the reader if sufficient error exists to distract. The New Jersey HSPT directions to the readers in registered holistic scoring indicate clearly that a lower score is to be given a paper if it is not "relatively free of error" in Mechanics. (State Department of Education, 14, 15). Myna Shaughnessy in her "Errors and Expectations" asks, "Why the emphasis on error? The reality is that certain types of errors are considered indicators of ineducability," and further that "remedial programs are likely to be evaluated (and budgeted) according to the speed with which they produce correct writers, correctness being a highly measurable feature of acceptable writing." (Shaughnessy, 8, 9).

From the reader's point of view, there is a relationship between reader and writer, and according to Shaughnessy, (11) the "reader wants to understand with as little energy as possible". From the writer's point of view, "students who make many errors feel helpless about correcting them....and planning instruction with success built into each lesson" is the key to removing that

helplessness. Each of the error lessons included in the project, following Shaughnessy's lead, are brief, one-step items, which lead the student to believe it is possible to produce a paper free from error.

This is not to indicate that the course in any way includes or involves formal grammar lessons. However, sentence combining and embedding provide opportunities for brief lessons in punctuation and sentence structure. Early class warm-ups or sponges done in the style of Hunter's work (Hunter, More-Faster, 80), provide an arena for instruction in spelling and usage. Moreover, the revision portion of the process provides individual instruction where needed. Analysis of student papers often spurs next-morning warm-up activities in error correction. Papers demonstrating frequent misuse of introductory commas might cause the instructor to insert a five-minute lesson in this skill, followed by including the skill in the next day's dictation.

MODELING

Modeling is used extensively in two forms--as group board work to introduce a pattern and as slotted exercises. This modeling is necessary because the course is developed for low-level achievers and because it is indicated as part of any good teaching technique.

Traditional composition courses, such as the Warriner's Advanced Composition Models, held that good rhetorical models could be labeled as to type and distributed, where after students would proceed to copy the organization of the model. Donald Murray in A Writer Teaches Writing, (107), calls this "Myth #8" in a long list of myths too often held to be true about writing instruction. Modeling with the students is, however, an altogether different bag of tricks. First of all, as Murray points out, (among others, beginning with Moffett), the writing teacher "writes with his students" (21). "He (sic) should write on the board in front of the students trying to develop

a paragraph, editing and changing the words according to student suggestions." Further Murray asserts that "To convince the students of the process, the teacher must be willing to expose his own personal struggle with language. The teacher....is also a participant...." (Murray, 22).

The slotted model technique is something borrowed from the elementary school. We believe slotting to be good technique at any level, and we have included the use of slotted exercises for each of the major areas of composition (descriptive, narrative, expository) as well as slotting for introductions and conclusions. Using the ideas as outlined by the Weehawken Project, guided practices were developed from a single sentence to one paragraph, and in several instances, a two or more paragraph piece. These serve as further modeling techniques or guided practice.

STRUCTURE OF THE DAILY PLANS

The question of guided practice leads us to the structure of the daily lesson plans. In each of these we have made a conscious effort to imitate the work done by Madelyn Hunter. Each of the daily plans includes an anticipatory set, an introduction to the lesson, and guided practice, though independent practice is often the following lesson. This method of instruction provides a tight structure for the teacher and provides for retention for the pupils.

In the research developed by George Hillocks, a considerable number of writing programs were statistically analyzed. Those that were developed along the lines of the writing process proved to be 50% more effective as measured by the increase in student ability in prescribed skill areas. However, the most startling statistic of Hillocks study comes from programs he refers to as "experimental". These were programs where the writing process was used as part of the structure and where modeling, sentence combining, established criteria for peer review, and inquiry methods for problem solving elements were also

emphasized. The experimental approache which combined the process approach with more structured techniques were found to be an additional 25% more effective than those based solely on process models, again as judged by increase in student ability in skills areas. By including both process and structure, our program meets the criteria Hillock would classify as experiments.

PRODUCT

Motivation is always a primary concern, especially when dealing the the student of lower ability. Motivation for the student, according to "Pawn or Origin", by DeCharms, rests on a number of factors, but especially on perceived relevance of the lesson in question. Although every teacher undoubtedly encourages students to be aware of the audience when writing, secretly the student writer is well-aware that the teacher is often the only audience likely to read the material, no matter how carefully planned and executed the work may be.

Consequently, a real audience, preferably of peers, is essential to successful writing. Writing teachers have included publication in some form as part of their course. Journalism advisors quickly note the vast difference in effort expended on a piece to be published as opposed to the typical "What I Did on Summer Vacation" composition composed in front of the TV during commercial breaks. The writing process approach, as designed by Murray and others, includes publication as an essential element, whether "only the best work" is published (Murray, 16) or all efforts. These publications may be no more than mimeographed, dittoed, or photocopied sheets bound into a class magazine (Judy, 47-49) or as in our case, a newspaper or journal distributed to both school and community. The pride developed by knowledge that the article is to be published serves to increase the effort expended and to make the

Studying a group of seventy-two students in both computer-based and non-computer based sections of a technical writing course at Drexel University, Mimi Schwartz found that computers make revision easier for the following reasons:

1. The ability to rewrite without recopying.
2. The ability to reread clean texts free from cross-outs.
3. The availability of CAT features such as the spelling the thesaurus programs.
4. The greater ease in formatting. (Schwartz, 1).

Interestingly, Schwartz questions, in part V, "Implications of the Study", several areas where more research is needed. The first of these is, "How applicable are these findings to writers of different ages, abilities, and writing concerns? Would developmental students, children and Lit majors have the same positive attitudinal shifts?" (Schwartz, 6).

A statistical study of the effect of computers on the work of young students needs to be done. Our statistics are based on the program results in their entirety and no hard facts can be drawn from our study. However, if we were only to argue the ease of producing the classroom product we believe essential to the process, this alone would justify the use of the word processor. We can further testify that no time is lost on adapting today's technologically astute youngsters to a machine they perceive as considerably more "user-friendly" than their pen. If there were no other support for the use of the word processor in the writing classroom, the success story of our seventh graders would be sufficient.

SUMMARY

Much work has been done in the field of writing during the past ten years. All of the early writers in the field have dealt with the development of the process of writing in some way or another. A fault with strictly process work has been that it develops the skills needed to produce writing, but not the critical thinking skills needed to develop the content of the paper. A second flaw in the early steps of developing writing curriculum has been to emphasize solely organization and content. We have tried to base our work and have found support in the research, to include not just content and organization, but also the thinking processes, good teaching methods, and last but not least, the process of error correction. Not only is our structure supported by the sources investigated, but it is further supported by our own research statistics.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICE

The course follows a detailed set of lesson plans which include specific teacher directions as well as student directions. The purpose of the course is to develop basic writing skills for students who have been identified as lacking in these skills or as potentially having difficulty in the writing phase of the High School Proficiency Test.

The sequence of skills taught is as follows:

1. Concrete description in a sentence - Students are taught to add vivid verbs and descriptive adjectives and adverbs for first one sentence and then to short series of sentences describing an object. Students first brainstorm, then model, then work independently or in groups.

2. Sentence Skills - Students review parts of speech, without emphasis on naming, but with an emphasis on function in description. Sentence variety is then taught through embedding first compound sentences, compounds in a paragraph, participial phrase embedding, adjective clause embedding, and finally, adverbial clause embedding. Combinations of these skills are then tried as a group and independently.

3. Description - The concrete description taught in sentence structure is then applied to first a paragraph and then a two to three paragraph piece. Sensory description is developed in phrases and then applied to a given subject. Students then choose a subject of their own.

4. Sequencing - Time order is taught through re-ordering of given information. Time order transitions are then taught in sentence and in paragraph settings. Students are then asked to expand on time order details in a given and familiar situation and these are applied to the narrative skills of giving directions, recounting an incident, and finally, to an independent choice of narrative topic.

5. Narration - The details needed for a good topic sentence are taught through the journalism heuristic. These skills are then applied to the writing of a narrative.

6. Grouping, Classifying and Clustering - Students work with exercises designed to help them decide on classifications of various ideas as a prelude to organizing ideas for expository writing.

7. Emphasizing Main Idea - Headlines are practiced as well as lead sentences to guide students in developing introductions.

8. Writing Conclusions - Practice is given in time order sequence conclusions, summarizations, and drawing a conclusion or providing a possible solution to the topic question.

9. Expository - Students practice distinguishing between fact and opinion and learn the terms objective and subjective. They will then change statements from fact to opinion and vice-versa. Students then practice grouping and classifying ideas for given topics as a group, and afterward independently. After sufficient practice in devising facts, organizing facts, and expanding detail, students choose a topic and combine the skills previously taught to develop an expository essay of their own choosing.

10. Throughout the course, 5 to 10 minute mini lessons are given in the mechanical skills of punctuation, homonym spellings, proofreading, and revision.

11. Each step of the course includes opportunities for group practice, peer review and critique, and then for independent practice.

12. After all basic skills have been covered, students select topic choices to produce either a journal or newsletter from their class. This product is student edited as well as student writer. Very often, it is composed on the word processor as well.

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FORMATIVE EVALUATION

Three teachers taught the program who were not involved in the grant. Surveys were developed and distributed to each of these teachers requesting information about the grant lesson plans, the ease of using the lesson plans, and the teachers' attitudes toward both writing in general and toward writing instruction.

Results with regard to attitudes toward writing in general indicated similarity in sixteen of the eighteen survey questions. A significant difference was noted in preference for teaching writing as opposed to literature, with one teacher almost never preferring the teaching of writing. A difference occurred also in the area of using writing as a personal tool to express feelings, with results indicating a range from almost always to seldom.

With regard to the use of the materials, again only two questions indicated a difference in attitude. Only one teacher found some difficulty with following the lesson plans, with the same teacher indicating only some enjoyment in teaching the course.

Teachers reported that teacher instructions were clear, materials were easy to use, and that a significant increase in student skills was evident.

SUMMATIVE EVALUATION

Writing samples were taken at the end of sixth grade and again at the end of the nine week instruction in seventh grade. Both sets of papers were scored on an holistic scale ranging from a low of two to a high score of twelve.

The average increase in score was computed (see Table 1). In both schools increases of greater than 1.5 were found and over all the average gain was 1.82. Increases of even one point on the scale of 2 to 12 are significant from a practical standpoint, as increases are more difficult to demonstrate using the holistic scale than on an objective scoring vehicle.

Scores were also analyzed by comparing the number and percentage of students increasing their writing ability by 1 or more on the holistic scale 2 to 12. Seventy-eight percent (153 of 198) of the students tested increased their scores by one or more on the holistic scale (Table 2). The results were similar for both schools and for various teachers.

The results were also analyzed for high and low achieving students, defined by California Achievement Test scores. Those scoring above the seventieth percentile were assigned to the high achieving group and those at or below were assigned to the low achieving group. No significant difference in the proportion of students gaining one or more on the holistic scale was noted for those above or below this score (see Table 3). The program was initially developed for remedial students, but as has just been shown, the program works well with general and higher achieving students.

Table #1 - Overall Average Increase on Holistic Scale by percent

Group	N	Pretest Mean	Post test Mean	Gains
School #1	106	79	27	75%
School #2	92	74	18	80%
Total	198	153	45	78%

Table #2 - Numbers of students gaining one or more on Holistic Scale

Group	N	Pretest Scores	Post test	Gains
School 1	106	7.05	8.68	1.63
School 2	92	6.30	8.30	2.00
Total	198	6.67	8.49	1.82

Table #3 - Increase in Holistic Score for low and high achieving students

Group	N	N-70	Increase >1	<1	Percent >1
School 1	106	32	24	8	75%
School 2	92	67	53	14	79%
Total	198	99	77	22	78%

Group	N	N+70	Increase >1	<1	Percent >1
School 1	106	74	55	19	74%
School 2	92	25	21	4	88%
Total	198	99	76	23	77%

A small group of students who had been pretested in school #2 were unable to be scheduled for the program and thus offered an opportunity to compare their results with those students who participated in the program. Only 41% of these non-program students increased their scores by at least 1 point as compared to 80% of their peers in the program who increased their scores by 1 or more (see Table 4).

Table #4 - Comparison of program and non-program students

Group	N	Increase >1	Increase <1	Percent >1
Control	32	13	19	41%
Program	92	14	18	80%

In the previous school year (1985-86), the program operated only for students identified as having difficulty in writing as judged by scores on a writing sample. Classes were limited to 10-12 students and the program was taught only by the authors of this grant. In that year, statistical results indicated that 79% of all students enrolled increased their scores by 2 or more points.

Lesson Plan #6

I. Objectives:

To reinforce sequence skills and introduce transitions.

Warm-up

Dictation

1. My clothes are all too loose since I've lost weight.

2. Our cousins tried out for the boys' team, but they didn't make it.

Sentence Combining

Many early forms of writing were in the form of pictures. These pictures were drawn on stone. (and)

Teacher Directed Activity

II. Focus:

Review with students the idea of time order, reminding them of previous sequence sheets. Give students handouts on types of "bridges" or transitions.

1. transitional words
2. repeating a key idea
3. using a pronoun or synonym, and the list of transitions.

III. Instruction:

Give small group sets of cardboard strips with story sentences out of order and have students place the story physically in sequence. Extrinsic reward (points to winning team) may be offered. Point out the ques./ans. sequences, cause and effect, and the transitions used,

or have students use as a worksheet.

IV. Reinforcement:

Point out any clues or transitions students used to decide on the correct order.

Student Directed Activity

TO THE STUDENT:

The following sentences describing the scene of a car race were written, brainstormed by an author. Rearrange the sentences to write the scene in correct order.

_____ The sports cars glinted in the sunlight as their engines were revved for the championship race.

_____ The two men stared disdainfully at one another as they approached the starting line.

_____ Ahead loomed the turn, its walls scarred by the black rubber metal chips, and gouges left by unsuspecting victims of "Satan's Swerve."

_____ The crowds roared as the signal light flashed the count of "3, 2, 1."

_____ Neither driver relaxed and neither would pull back, both knowing the last to manuever the turn would lose the race.

_____ The swerve began, with both cars and drivers racing head to head, giving no edge to the other.

_____ Adjusting helmets, gloves, and suits, each man saluted the crowd and folded into the waiting animal he knew could mean victory, defeat, or death.

_____ Green flashed and the drivers, gripping the wheels of powerful, monstrous machines, jerked as the cars spun dirt and smoke and flashed forward with lightening speed.

_____ Each driver, now intent on his goal, saw nothing but the oncoming turn but knew the next ten seconds could mean life or death.

_____ "Pull back! Pull back!" screamed the crowd.

Now you complete the story.

Student Directed Activity

Organization: "Stripes the Cat"

Just as a sentence is a string of words, a paragraph is a string of sentences. Each paragraph needs a focus or central idea to hold it together. Look at the photographs — how can they be used to tell a story? The sentences or captions tell the story one way, but the same pictures could be used to tell a different story.

1. Write a central focus statement about the pictures.
2. Re-arrange the picture if you need to tell a story.
3. Now write a paragraph about Stripes and his friends.

This is the pits!

29

I'm all alone and no one to play with, just a forgotten bike.

Even sliding is downhill without a friend.

Are you looking for someone to play with too?

We're off to look for fun.

30

Lesson Plan #9

I. Objective:

Students will recognize and develop paragraphs through the use of focus or central idea.

Teacher Directed Activity

II. Focus:

Remind students that they have been writing stories or paragraphs in time order. Ask if they have ever made up "captions" or sayings for photographs they've taken (yearbooks and scrapbooks do this.)

Warm-up

Dictation:

1. Of course, they're coming too.

2. They've already finished their homework, and they're all ready to go out.

Sentence Combining

Sue is tall.
Sue is limber.
Sue is athletic.
Sue likes to play basketball.

III. Instruction:

Tell students they will now use a set of photographs to write a paragraph, but not necessarily in time order. Have students look at the yellow slicker group, or a similar set you might have, and ask them for main idea statements. This could be about rain, about wearing a new slicker, about playing alone.

IV. Guided Practice:

Using the sentences under the photographs or sentences of their own, have students write a model paragraph with a topic sentence or main idea on the board, as a group. You may wish to assign each photo to an individual student to avoid confusion. Remind student to use transitions in their paragraphs.

V. Independent Practice:

Using "Stripes the Cat," have students:

1. Write a central focus statement for the paragraphs.
2. Re-write the paragraph using the pictures in a different order than that given.

Maybe it's still raining. Something just fell.

It looks wet. Yep! Wet, and cold too.

Now the puddles are all gone.

Is that what Mommy said was a rainbow?